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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**Countering Putin's Nuclear-backed Aggression with a Continuous Nuclear-Capable
Bomber Presence.**

by

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed
by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

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A Continuous Nuclear Bomber Presence (CNBP) should be a part of a strategy for countering Putin's aggression in Eastern Europe. A nuclear-capable bomber force that permanently rotates through the EUCOM Area of Responsibility (AOR) would provide the United States with the ability to attack Putin's strategy in three ways. First, a CNBP would help deter Russia and counter Putin's nuclear threats by providing a potent reminder of U.S. resolve to the region. Second, the CNBP will assure both U.S. partner nations in Eastern Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), countering Putin's plans to undermine the region. Finally, the CNBP would disincentivize nations that are seeking to become a nuclear power in Europe, ensuring nuclear proliferation does not occur in Europe.

Since Russia's aggression began, NATO has proposed several ways to reassure its members that they can stand up to Putin. There have been discussions about moving tactical nuclear warheads east, which would place them on Russia's borders.¹ Others have called for conventional deterrence, such as Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) systems, to be moved into eastern areas in order to destroy Russian nuclear missiles after launch.² Another call has been to equip countries in Eastern Europe with better Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2AD) capabilities.³ The CNBP, along with these proposals as well as other strategies (including counterinsurgency and information operations) would help to deter Putin and his ambitions in Eastern Europe.

The strategies of the Cold War era resulted in peace in Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin's actions and nuclear rhetoric are threatening the decades-long struggle to ensure stability in Europe. The purpose of this piece is to explain how the CNBP can contribute to a better stability in Europe through the deterrence of Russia. This paper will also explain how

the CNBPs will assure U.S. allies in the region. This piece will not focus on the necessary European politics that would have to be addressed for the enactment of the CNBP.

Russian Paranoia

Russia has always viewed NATO as a threat. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union buffered its security to its west by establishing the Warsaw Pact, which was a mutual defense alliance that tried to counter NATO. This alliance of communist states insulated the Soviets from the West and was the basis for their defense. The Soviet Union, their allies, the United States, and NATO spent the Cold War with the promise that if either side used nuclear weapons against the other, all nations would be destroyed under a policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). While dangerous, Europe was stable under the policy of MAD.

The reunification of Germany in 1990 was the first expansion of western influence that caused alarm within Moscow.⁴ The Russians were further threatened when many other Eastern European countries attempted to join NATO after the fall of the Soviet Union. Within a decade, three former Warsaw Pact states joined NATO only to be followed by more former allies and even former Soviet Socialist Republics.⁵ Russia's military and economic realities meant that they would have little to say about the threat they felt approaching their borders. Any attempt to calm those fears was viewed with skepticism and suspicion.⁶

The actions of NATO and the European Union (EU) to expand into the Balkan territories added to Russia's fears about the ultimate plan of the west. Putin felt the Ukrainian and Kyrgyzstan popular revolts (known as the Color Revolutions) in 2004 and 2005 were inspired by the U.S. He felt the U.S. had intentions of either subverting Russian influence or was planning to install a pro-U.S. government in the Kremlin.⁷ In 2008, NATO moved toward extending membership to Georgia and Ukraine, which resulted in Russia and NATO's relationship sinking

to its lowest point since the Cold War.⁸ Putin viewed NATO's expansion as aggression toward Russia and was therefore unacceptable. "It turns out that NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders . . . NATO expansion . . . Represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust . . . Against whom is this expansion intended?"⁹

Putin's Strategy – Undermine Partner Nations

Russia's strategy is to have a buffer zone between itself and the NATO countries on their western border.¹⁰ Putin will use force to ensure that a buffer zone exists for Russia's financial and security interests. Any growth from NATO, the EU, or the West, is considered a threat and Putin has used and will continue to use force to stop it. Furthermore, Putin views multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations Security Council, as fronts for the U.S. and its European Allies.¹¹ Putin's strategy means he views any move into this buffer zone as a threat.

Putin has shown that he has the conventional means to undermine partner nations. In 2008, he enacted his strategy when Russia invaded Georgia under the guise of minority protection in South Ossetia.¹² Russia stated that the action was a humanitarian effort, but it was clearly retribution for NATO considering the admission of Georgia. Russia used military force to protect its influence in the nations on their border, which they refer to as the "near abroad" area.¹³ The military action was a warning to NATO to keep out of Russia's buffer zone. Putin would begin to use new tactics to grow Russian influence shortly after this incident.

Russia viewed the Arab Spring as a new way to conduct ops in order to achieve their buffer zone.¹⁴ Russia believed that they could help incite a revolution in a target country, then invade that nation under the premise of a humanitarian effort. Crimea was the perfect arena for Putin to exercise hybrid warfare in order to destabilize the country then leverage the chaos for Russia's benefit. First, Russia used diplomatic, legal, and economic measures to put pressure on

the government and to set the narrative in the international community.¹⁵ Next, Russia used tactics such as bribery and propaganda to instigate protesting within the populace and thus destabilize Ukraine.¹⁶ Russia was very careful to legally qualify any action they made, including taking the stance that they were not militarily occupying the Ukraine.¹⁷ Ultimately, Russia annexed Crimea by eroding the populace's confidence in the state.¹⁸ Russia had successfully used hybrid warfare to secure their buffer zone.

Russia's annexation of Crimea proved again that Putin is willing to use different tactics to secure their buffer zone. Though the aggression into the Ukraine was called "an act of revenge for past humiliation" it was clearly a part of Putin's strategy to have a buffer zone and undermine Eastern European nations.¹⁹ Russia used its networks in Ukraine to cause instability. Putin then used his forces to intervene in the chaos he helped to produce, giving a sense of legitimacy to his actions. Putin has shown his willingness to use conventional or hybrid means to destabilize nations and maintain Russia's buffer zone.

Putin's Strategy – Undermine NATO

Russia's undermining of partner nations has the effect of undermining NATO as well. Putin has been clear about his desire to undermine NATO to further aid in securing Russia's buffer zone. The Kremlin has opposed proposals for NATO involvement in many European issues (such as energy security).²⁰ Recently, Russia has even suggested negotiating an alternative European security alliance.²¹ It is not surprising that Russia wishes to keep NATO out of European politics. Putin's use of both military and hybrid warfare actions have caused both member and nonmember nations to have doubts in NATO.

Russia's subversive and conventional actions caused Formerly Soviet Union (FSU) states (especially in the Baltic) to have doubts in NATO.²² The conventional actions in Georgia

and the hybrid warfare actions in the Ukraine occurred so quickly that NATO did not have much time to react. This slow reaction made these countries question whether NATO could help them in the event of future Russian aggression.²³ These states will be less likely to join NATO if they do not believe NATO can help them. However, Putin's potential to undermine NATO is not limited to non-member states such as Georgia or the Ukraine.

The Kremlin has well-funded financial, media, information networks, and sympathetic populations (including citizens of Russian descent) in many NATO countries.²⁴ The Russian networks in these countries could pose a threat to governments if Putin enacted hybrid warfare again. What if he followed his subversion actions with conventional military means in a state such as Poland? Poland might not be able to defend itself against Russia long enough for NATO to intervene.²⁵ Putin could start a war and then offer the state a settlement that is advantageous to Russia before NATO could respond. Putin's actions have been successful in undermining NATO within its member states as well as potential partners of the alliance.

Putin's Strategy – Nuclear Weapons Prevent Western Interference

Laying at the foundation of Putin's strategy are his nuclear weapons. He still sees Russia as a super power mostly because of his large stockpile of nuclear weapons.²⁶ Unlike the U.S. and China, Russia's public policy does not preclude them from using nuclear weapons even if a Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) has not been used against them. Their policy states that they can use nuclear weapons if conventional warfare threatens their nation.²⁷ Putin relies on this policy in case his conventional weapons do not produce a decisive victory. Russia's pledge to modernize its nuclear arsenal also signaled that they will be relying on these weapons for the foreseeable future to keep nations from interfering with their plans to secure their buffer zone.

Nuclear weapons deter conflict by promising that the costs of action against a nuclear-armed country will be significantly higher than the rewards. A credible deterrent is achieved when the enemy believes one has both the *will* and the capability (or *credibility*) to use the nuclear weapons.²⁸ While the U.S. would like to see the world free of nuclear weapons, Russia has signaled that they will no longer discuss nuclear arms control.²⁹ The mismatch between American and Russian views on nuclear weapons could be problematic. Russia may see the U.S. as not having the will to employ their nuclear arsenal, which could erode U.S. deterrence and embolden Russia to leverage their arsenal. Russia's nuclear weapons will likely stay central to their strategy, and their recent rhetoric has been an indication of their will.

When the international community condemned Russian aggression, Putin quickly reminded them that Russia is one of the world's most powerful nuclear nations.³⁰ Further, Russian leaders announced that they had been updating their nuclear arsenal with the goal of being able to match NATO.³¹ Russian foreign Prime Minister Sergei Lavrov even stated that Russia could move nuclear weapons to Crimea without violating international law since it was now a part of Russia.³² The Kremlin threatened to deploy nuclear weapons to both Kaliningrad and Crimea, which demonstrated that they were considering using nuclear means to shore up their hybrid warfare gains.³³ The "nuclear saber-rattling" that Russia conducts is meant to deter retaliation for their movements by showing that they have the *will* to use their weapons.

Russia has also made moves to prove that their nuclear operations are *credible*. Since 2014, Russia has exercised its nuclear-capable force at higher than usual levels.³⁴ In 2014 and the first part of 2015, NATO aircraft intercepted nearly four times as many Russian Tu-95s (a nuclear-capable bomber) than they did in previous years.³⁵ Exercises involving nuclear-capable bombers, naval ships, submarines, and missiles have been combined with large ground forces.³⁶

These exercises focus on command and control as well as the force's capability to perform nuclear strikes. Ground force integration into these exercises gives Russia the ability to practice escalation from conventional war to nuclear war. Exercises like these demonstrate that Russia has the capability and tactical coordination to launch nuclear warheads if they deem it necessary.

Russia has also signaled that they are willing to disregard international treaties regarding nuclear weapons. Kremlin officials have openly questioned whether Russia should be participating in the New START treaty, Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.³⁷ Recently, questions have arisen as to whether or not Russia is in compliance with the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INFT).³⁸ Russia's words and actions disregarding international nuclear norms can lead to a greater risk of miscalculation between nuclear powers. Russia is signaling that they are willing to risk nuclear war for their buffer zone.

Putin's strategy is clear. He wants a buffer zone around Russia to exert his influence. He will use conventional or hybrid warfare to undermine nations in order to install a pro-Russian government or at least freeze their coordination with the West. He wishes to undermine NATO in order to maintain or even grow his buffer zone. Finally, he uses his nuclear arsenal as a credible and visible element of military power to prevent western interference.

Continuous Bomber Presence in PACOM

The CBP started in 2004 to demonstrate America's commitment to security in the Pacific.³⁹ The CBP demonstrates U.S. resolve to allies and provides a visual counter to China and North Korea. Typically, the force consists of six B-52s deployed to Andersen AFB in Guam. The bombers routinely fly training missions with allied nations such as South Korea, Australia, and Japan. These operations have led to better force integration and have helped assure alliances in the Pacific.

The bombers have also been used for signaling during times of contention (like when B-2s and B-52s flew along the North Korean border after they conducted a nuclear test).⁴⁰ Missions like these are designed to show that the U.S. has the capability and the will to carry out a nuclear mission if needed. The assurance and deterrence capabilities of the CBP can be adapted for Eastern Europe but must include bombers with a nuclear carrying capability.

Current Nuclear-Capable Bomber Activities in Europe

The B-52 and B-2 have participated in exercises (like BALTOPS and Polar Growl) in Europe in the past. Just like the CBP, these exercises help to build interoperability between the U.S. and its allies in Europe.⁴¹ Short-term flights of nuclear bombers into Europe have also been used as a counter to Putin's aggression.⁴² Since Russia's incursion into the Ukraine, the bomber deployments to Europe have steadily increased.⁴³ While these exercises have shown resolve to our allies and given pause to the Kremlin, they usually only last about one week. The bombers are not in the region long enough to provide a visual deterrent to Putin's activities. The CNBP will provide a permanent deterrent and assurance presence in the AOR.

The CNBP – Countering Putin's Nuclear Rhetoric

The CNBP attacks the foundation of Putin's strategy, which is his nuclear arsenal. Nuclear capability is the only way to deter nuclear weapons. As former Secretary of Defense William Perry once stated, "all that U.S. nuclear weapons have done is stop the Russians from carrying out a nuclear attack on us."⁴⁴ While his comments may have been cynical, Perry correctly points out that nuclear weapons deter an adversary from engaging in nuclear warfare. Currently, Putin does not consider the U.S. and NATO nuclear commitment in the region as a credible threat to Russia, and that must change. It was a nuclear capability that provided stability

between NATO, the U.S., and the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War. Nuclear capability is the only way to stabilize the region now.

The CNBP provides a credible counter to Russia's strategy as to when they will use their nuclear weapons. Russia claims it needs theater nuclear weapons to counter NATO's conventional advantage.⁴⁵ The CNBP in Europe would ensure that Russia has to be concerned with nuclear weapons as well. Bombers provide an ability to project nuclear power into Russia. The stealthiness of both the B-2 and the air launched standoff nuclear missiles of the B-52 have the ability to penetrate Russia's A2AD environment. This means that the nuclear fight may not happen in Eastern Europe but within Russia's borders. If Russia chooses to employ nuclear weapons, the CNBP guarantees that these strikes will be answered. The CNBP makes Russia vulnerable to a nuclear attack, which will make them reconsider their nuclear saber-rattling.

The CNBP will also provide a timely counter to Russia's nuclear bombers, which have caused concern amongst the European countries by flying near NATO borders. Russian nuclear-capable bombers, such as the Tu-160 or "Blackjack" have increased their flights along the borders of countries like the U.K.⁴⁶ These flights have caused NATO allies to seek a response more decisive than just a fighter intercept. The CNBP allows for a credible answer to these threats in a timely fashion. For example, just one day after China declared an Area Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in 2013, two B-52s flew through that airspace, testing Chinese resolve.⁴⁷ The CNBP can send a nuclear-capable bomber up to Russia's borders in kind, providing a quick response to Putin's bombers.

Since Russia's nuclear-backed aggression began, NATO and scholars alike have been calling for a way to counter the nuclear threat. One NATO consideration is the resumption of Cold War era exercises to counter Russia's aggression.⁴⁸ These exercises can take months to plan

if the bombers are flying out of the continental U.S. because the planners need liaisons and have to coordinate for tanker support to get into the region. The CNBP allows the bombers to participate in more exercises because they can be planned for with little notice. Additionally, less planning time is required since coordination for tanker support is not needed. By participating in additional NATO sponsored nuclear exercises, bombers can improve the nuclear readiness and posture of Europe, provide an answer to Russian exercises, and expand the allies nuclear capability.

The CNBP Effects on Putin

Russia has shown that it is afraid of even a small expansion of nuclear capabilities in Eastern Europe. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the U.S. plan to modernize only 20 nuclear warheads “could alter the balance of power in Europe” and that Russia would “take necessary countermeasures to restore the strategic balance” in the region.⁴⁹ The modernization of these nuclear B-61 bombs was enough to give Putin pause, but these weapons have been in the region for some time and did not deter him from threatening nuclear warfare. Nuclear-capable submarines have also been in the area, but by their very design, they are survivable, not visible. Likewise, nuclear Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) are located too far away to be a reminder of U.S. commitment to the nuclear umbrella. What NATO needs is a visible change in the nuclear capabilities within Europe.

A visual change in the nuclear capability in the region will cause Putin to pause before making nuclear threats. Nuclear-capable bombers are the most visible leg of the nuclear triad. Bombers can be seen when moving from one location to another and generally illicit attention when they move. As Lieutenant General Stephen Wilson, the former Air Force Global Strike Commander, once stated, “Anytime we send out bombers anywhere in the world, people pay

attention.”⁵⁰ The bombers have not been in EUCOM on a permanent basis since the Cold War. NATO and the U.S. will provide a signal to Putin of their nuclear commitment to the region if they place nuclear bombers in Europe on a permanent basis. The CNBP can help keep Putin’s nuclear-backed aggressions in check.

The CNBP will be both a conventional and nuclear deterrent to Russia. The bombers carry a significant conventional payload, which can help counter Putin should he invade another Eastern European country. Additionally, the CNBP will ensure that Putin does not escalate a conventional war to a nuclear war by promising a nuclear response in kind. The CNBP can counter Putin’s strategy of relying on his nuclear arsenal as the basis for his buffer zone, but perhaps the greatest promise of the CNBP is its ability to reassure partners and allies of U.S. commitment to them.

The CNBP – Reassuring NATO and Partners

NATO’s members are questioning whether the alliance or the U.S. has the ability or the will to stand up to Putin. There have been calls for nuclear exercises, BMD systems, and even the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons.⁵¹ Missing from these proposals is the notion of a nuclear bomber presence in the region on an enduring basis. This is surprising considering how many NATO members and European nations are striving to work with these bombers when they participate in a week-long exercise. Sweden, typically an anti-nuclear nation, has been eager to conduct exercises with B-52s.⁵² The bombers have recently been involved in exercises in Spain and other areas as well.⁵³ NATO members see the bombers as an answer to Putin and have been quick to invite them to participate in military exercises. There are many benefits to these exercises, but the only drawback is that they are temporary visual reminders. A permanent presence would be better.

The CBP in the Pacific provides an example of the benefits of having bombers in a region. The CBP forces routinely exercise with partner nations to demonstrate that the alliance is a credible force. Exercises like Valiant Shield, Talisman Sabre, Ulchi Freedom, and Foal Eagle have helped to build interoperability with allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia. U.S. partners can work through things such as Command and Control (C2), and Air and Sea Battle (ASB), in order to mass forces in an A2AD environment. These exercises allow the U.S. to assure allies that they are ready to defend them against an adversary (like North Korea or China). They also ensure that the coalition will have interoperability should war break out.

By training with bombers in Europe, nations will be reassured of NATO's capability to protect them. The Baltic States have expressed concerns with Russian policies toward Eastern Europe and the increase of Russian exercises in the area.⁵⁴ Norway has also expressed concern with Russia's use of military force.⁵⁵ Regular interactions with bombers would allow the U.S. and NATO to establish interoperability with these allies. Regular bomber participation in exercises will assure partner nations by demonstrating U.S. and NATO military capabilities and their commitment to countering Putin. If Russia's rhetoric turns into action, then the alliance will be assured that they will have a response for Putin.

PACOM exercises that feature bombers also help deter adversaries in the Pacific. Potential adversaries have observed some of these exercises, which demonstrates that they are concerned about the firepower allies will bring to a fight. During the 2014 Valiant Shield exercise, a Chinese surveillance ship was spotted in the area.⁵⁶ Likewise, the more exercises the CNBP can be involved in, the better Russia will understand that NATO is a credible military coalition. These exercises will help to deter Russian aggression.

The CNBP – Disincentivizing Nuclear Ambitions in Europe

The CNBP can also keep nuclear weapons from proliferating to nations that do not currently have them. If more nations possess nuclear weapons, the more likely those weapons are going to be employed in the future. Part of U.S. strategy is to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons through the use of “extended deterrence.”⁵⁷ To achieve this goal, the U.S. promises to defend other nations in order to keep those nations from developing their own nuclear arsenals.⁵⁸ However, some Eastern European countries are questioning whether they can survive a war against Putin without nuclear weapons, which could lead to the developing their own nuclear programs. In fact, the Ukrainian president and members of the Ukrainian government have expressed regret in transferring the nuclear weapons they did have.⁵⁹ It is not hard to imagine that these nations would like to obtain nuclear weapons. Again, one can look at what the CBP in the Pacific has done to keep allies from developing nuclear capability.

South Korea has been on the receiving end of nuclear threats from North Korea for over a decade. North Korea coupled their usual threats of nuclear action against South Korea with a successful underground test of a nuclear warhead in February of 2013. The interaction made a nuclear exchange more likely than in the previous six decades.⁶⁰ North Korea also declared that they were in a “state of war” and severed their communications with South Korea and the U.S.⁶¹ USPACOM Commander Locklear concluded that the tensions between North Korea and South Korea were the highest since the armistice was agreed upon.⁶² The U.S. responded with additional B-52 flights into South Korea from the CBP. They augmented the CBP force with two B-2s flying nonstop into the AOR as well.⁶³ The CBP and its augmented bombers from the U.S. were able to reassure South Koreans.

In 2012, the majority (66%) of South Koreans felt that their country should develop a nuclear weapon.⁶⁴ The U.S. needed to reassure South Koreans of its commitment and used the CBP and an augmented force to do just that. Joint Chief of Staff General Martin Dempsey expressed this when he said, “The reaction to the B-2 that we’re most concerned about is not necessarily the reaction it might elicit in North Korea, but rather among our Japanese and Korean allies. Those exercises are mostly to assure our allies that they can count on us to be prepared and to help them deter conflict.”⁶⁵

It would appear that the South Korean’s appreciated the bomber force as evidenced in a poll conducted by ASAN in September of 2013. The poll indicated that over 80 percent of the South Korean population viewed the United States military as a necessity.⁶⁶ Assurance of South Korea was also evident in President Park’s decision to meet with President Obama on her first official foreign visit. A new agreement signed in April of 2015 denied South Korea the ability to create a nuclear weapon.⁶⁷ South Korea has more confidence in the U.S. commitment to fighting with them due in large part to the CBP.⁶⁸ One can imagine that the CNBP would provide the same assurance to our allies in Europe and NATO.

The Baltic states are similar to South Korea. Both border a nuclear power that threatens to take over their governments using many means, which includes nuclear weapons. Countries in both regions have openly considered whether they should develop nuclear weapons to defend against a “nuclear saber-rattling” neighbor. The CBP is considered as a factor in the assurance of South Korea and the CNBP should be considered as a factor for assurance in Europe.

Counterargument

There are some who fear that nuclear improvement in Europe could lead to a renewed Cold War at best and escalation to war with Russia at worst. Russia was surprised that the U.S.

did not recall some of its tactical nuclear warheads in Europe after the Cold War. This led them to the modernization of their nuclear arsenal.⁶⁹ Adding a CNBP would feed into Putin's fears of NATO forcing a regime change in Russia. Russia will counter any actions that render their nuclear arsenal weaker or leave them at a disadvantage in the region. This is why they highly contest adding a BMD system in Europe.⁷⁰ The U.S. and NATO would only threaten Russia more by adding a permanent nuclear-capable bomber to the region because it will weaken their nuclear threat. This could lead to Russia engaging in more destabilizing operations or even war.

Others have suggested using conventional forces to counter Putin's aggression in Europe. They believe that the current nuclear capability in Europe is enough. They believe in using conventional missiles to strike within Russia and coupling those missiles with a BMD system to keep Putin's nuclear missiles from impacting in Europe.⁷¹ In this view, it is better to equip allies with better defensive and offensive capabilities in order to ensure that Russia cannot destabilize the region.⁷² These arguments have at their basis a desire to deter Putin without using additional nuclear capability.

Rebuttal

European stability is threatened more now than when the policy of MAD existed. The presence of nuclear weapons aided in European stability. The current level of conventional weapons and forces in Europe did not deter Putin from overthrowing countries nor did they deter him from leveraging his nuclear arsenal to prevent western interference. It is hard to believe that additional weapons will work in the future. Europe was stable during the Cold War due to nuclear weapons, not the lack of them. Furthermore, European nations will not be assured as long as Putin can counter conventional warfare with nuclear strikes.

While a more robust conventional force is needed (as well as other countermeasures to Russia), these means do not assure allies. Adding conventional capability alone is not a satisfying response to Putin's nuclear threat. The promise of destroying a building is not equivalent to a nuclear weapon that levels a city. One nuclear detonation in Europe would change the world. A BMD system cannot promise countries that it will negate every Russian nuclear missile. European countries will not be assured since conventional weapons cannot counter every missile Putin has and the conventional weapons cannot offer a satisfactory response to a nuclear attack.

An arms race is unlikely as Russia cannot afford one due to low oil prices which have forced their economy into a recession.⁷³ Additionally, the CNBP is unlikely to lead to a Cold War or an actual war as evidenced by the fact that none of these events occurred in the Pacific under the CBP. The CNBP is the best way to show U.S. and NATO resolve while countering Russia's stated nuclear weapons first policy.

Conclusion

The only way to counter a nuclear threat is with another nuclear threat. Russia recognizes this fact as evidenced when a Russian journalist stated that "the West had forgotten how it had used nuclear deterrence to coexist with the Soviet Union. Now it will have to open up that playbook once more."⁷⁴ NATO's current nuclear capability was not enough to stop Putin in 2008 or 2014. Increasing conventional capability will not work either, based on Russia's policy to use nuclear weapons if they are threatened by conventional forces. In fact, increased conventional capability might make a nuclear exchange with Russia more likely as it will feed Putin's reliance on nuclear weapons. The CNBP will improve nuclear capability in a way that Russia understands and seemingly expects.

Strategic assets (like the B-52 and B-2) in Europe will provide a visual confirmation of resolve which will assure allies and partners. The CNBP will provide increased nuclear capability without bringing additional nuclear weapons unless the situation requires it. Strategic bombers will provide a signal to Putin that the U.S. takes his nuclear threats seriously. The CNBP will also provide a satisfactory response should Putin escalate his nuclear rhetoric into nuclear warfare. The CNBP is the best way to assure allies and NATO while deterring Russia from using its nuclear arsenal. The CNBP is a necessary pillar in a comprehensive strategy to counter Putin in Europe.

NOTES

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